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European "Sophistication" vs. American "Naivete" by Owen Harries

FROM:
Herbert E. Meyer
Vice Chairman, NIC

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NIC #06267-84

THE DIRECTOR OF
CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

National Intelligence Council

2 November 1984

NOTE FOR THE DIRECTOR

FROM: Herbert E. Meyer
Vice Chairman, NIC

I commend to your attention this article
entitled European "Sophistication" vs. American
"Naivete". Its author is Owen Harries [redacted]

[redacted] Harries was Australian Ambassador to
UNESCO, Senior Advisor to Prime Minister
Fraser, and head of Policy Planning in the
Australian Department of Foreign Affairs.

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Commentary

Volume Seventy-six, Number Six, December 1983

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19 DEC 1983

European "Sophistication"
vs. American "Naiveté"
Owen Harries

The Greatest Living
American Philosopher
Josiah Lee Auspitz

Train to the West—A Story
Leon Steinmetz

"Colonia" According to Naipaul
Roger Sandall

Thinking About Crime Again
Ernest van den Haag

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Wohlstetter
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**The
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Norman
Podhoretz

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European "Sophistication" vs. American "Naiveté"

Owen Harries

The Europeans have a better understanding of the complexities of the present world difficulties than the United States.

—James Callaghan, *London Times*,
February 19, 1982

One dreams also of a real American foreign policy which takes realities into account. . . .

—Couve de Murville, *London Times*,
February 18, 1982

"It is recordable fact that the Reaganites hold alarming simplistic beliefs that divide the world into goodies and baddies," a conservative British editor said the other day. It seems hard to be a sophisticated European and also an admirer of Ronald Reagan.

—Robert G. Kaiser, *International Herald Tribune*, July 6, 1983

THE great transatlantic debate over deploying the Pershing-2 and cruise missiles in Western Europe has once again raised the question of how America's European allies see themselves, the United States, and international politics generally. Since the acute difference over Poland and the gas pipeline last year, the attention given to this question has diminished. Insofar as it has been addressed at all, it has been the attitudes of the Greens, the organized "peace movement," and the committed anti-Americans which have been most discussed. But those groups are not the most important elements in the situation. They are the outsiders of European politics. Their activities may make effective television, but—*pace* the Vietnam experience—the politics of the street in which they engage is the politics of the weak, of those without access to institutional power and decision-making. They will only have influence in circumstances in which those who have such access are themselves indecisive, doubt-ridden, or dangerously complacent.

What, then, are the prevailing assumptions and

OWEN HARRIES is John M. Olin Fellow at the Heritage Foundation. Formerly he was Australian Ambassador to UNESCO (1982-83), senior adviser to Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser, and head of policy planning in the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs.

perceptions concerning themselves and the United States of those who influence and make decisions in Europe? UNESCO is not the first place that comes to mind as a source of insight into this question, but one must find one's epiphanies where one can. The occasion I have in mind was the last day of the UNESCO conference on Education for International Understanding, Cooperation, and Peace in April of this year, a gathering which displayed all the characteristics one would expect of a conjunction of that sponsor and that topic.* In its closing stages the United States delegation (headed by Reagan-appointed Ambassador Jean Gerard and including a number of conservative advisers) had fought hard to resist a "compromise" under which the U.S. would have to surrender the one resolution that robustly asserted liberal, democratic (and supposedly UNESCO) values in return for the dropping of two of the many resolutions submitted by Communist countries. Finally, under intense pressure to "save the conference," berated by its European friends for its stubbornness, and having received instructions from the State Department to accept the compromise, the U.S. delegation unhappily gave way. But having done so, it used the final plenary session to vent its feelings and complained bitterly about UNESCO's betrayal of the values it claimed to uphold and about the failings of the conference generally.

Immediately afterward—and this is the point of the episode—a number of West European delegates gathered in the lobby to discuss what had happened. After a while, one of them summed up the general feeling with an exasperated question: "Isn't it a pity that the United States can't learn to lose gracefully?"

It is a remark that stays in the mind. The more one considers it, the clearer it becomes that losing gracefully is by now the essence of West European foreign policy. The willingness to do so is the main component of the superior "sophistication" and "realism" which are so insistently claimed,

* For a discussion of this meeting, see "How to Lose the War of Ideas," by Chester E. Finn, Jr. in the August issue of COMMENTARY.

sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly, for the Europeans. The claimed superiority is, of course, to the United States. In my experience, acceptance of a model of the Western alliance as being composed of wise, worldly Europeans who understand, and can play, the game of international politics in all its complexity, and a naive, ham-fisted America which does not and cannot, is a basic part of the mental make-up of a disturbing proportion of the people who shape, implement, and interpret European foreign policies. This is at least as true of conservatives as it is of social democrats and liberals. Belief in the model was strongly reinforced by the election of Ronald Reagan. The stereotypes of the B-grade Hollywood actor, the cowboy, the unreconstructed cold warrior were made to measure to confirm and justify the European sense of superiority. But that sense did not originate with his election and it will not end when he goes.

When one is exposed to this claim of superior realism and sophistication, one's first inclination is to ask where exactly is the evidence for it. If one considers some of the salient episodes in the history of Europe in this century—the events leading up to 1914, the Versailles peace conference, Munich, the extent of the effort Europe has been prepared to make to secure its own defense since 1948, and the current attitude toward the defense of its vital interests in the Persian gulf—one is not irresistibly led to concede European superiority. One might also be inclined to ask who, precisely, among Europeans has been more "sophisticated" than, say, Truman, Acheson, Nixon, and Kissinger, four men who among them ran American foreign policy for a good slice of the last forty years? These are legitimate, and in some circumstances necessary, questions. But insofar as the object is not to win an argument but to help the alliance function a little better, perhaps it is more profitable to try to understand the content of the claim than to contest it.

LET it be conceded at once that there are Europeans who are superbly equipped to comprehend the complexity of international politics and who are well grounded in the realist tradition which focuses attention on interests and power. At their best they are very good indeed. That having been said, however, two things must be added: first, increasingly they are not at their best; and second, most of the people who have to do with the making of foreign policy in Europe have only a casual and superficial acquaintance with the position and tradition they claim to represent.

As for the good people not performing at their best—which is the more interesting aspect—this, I believe, is largely explicable in terms of recent European history and the current state of the sociopolitical milieu in which they function. The

recent history of Europe is essentially a history of losing: losing control over the division of Europe after World War II; losing the military dominance Europeans had previously enjoyed; losing political control over the key strategic issues in their own continent and over their own security; and losing virtually all of the vast imperial possessions (and the trade networks that went with them) which had previously made them the managers of a very significant portion of the world's affairs. At the same time, domestically, governments and other key institutions have suffered a serious erosion of legitimacy and authority.

Moreover, while some of these losses were the unavoidable consequences of historical events, increasingly they have flowed from an inability to mobilize the will and the power necessary (and objectively available) to protect interests in a more effective and assertive way, and from declining commitment to the values professed by West Europeans. All this has been a very recent and very compressed experience, and its effect on the confidence of decision-makers, on their assumptions as to what is possible, their determination to shape events, has been profound.

What happens to realists in such circumstances? One of the things that happens is that the deterministic—even fatalistic—strain that is inherent in realism comes to predominate. An episode in the long career of the English historian E.H. Carr makes the point. At the end of the 1930's—another decade of loss and of a crisis of faith for West European democracies—Carr wrote his classic realist analysis of international politics, *The Twenty Years' Crisis*. In its first chapter he observed of realism:

In the field of thought, it places its emphasis on the acceptance of facts and on the analysis of their causes and consequences. It tends to depreciate the role of purpose and to maintain, explicitly or implicitly, that the function of thinking is to study a sequence of events which it is powerless to influence or alter. In the field of action realism tends to emphasize the irresistible strength of existing forces and the inevitable character of existing tendencies, and to insist that the highest wisdom lies in accepting, and adapting oneself to, these forces and these tendencies.

Carr then went on to illustrate his point by writing what another English historian, A.J.P. Taylor, was later to describe as "a brilliant argument in favor of appeasement."

Lest it should be thought that Carr was in any way eccentric and untypical, it should be pointed out that in the 1930's the link between appeasement and realism was widely recognized. When Harold Nicolson, a prominent anti-appeaser at the time, was attacked in the House of Commons by Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's supporters, his response was: "I know that in these

days of realism, principles are considered as rather eccentric and ideas are identified with hysteria." And a standard work on the subject, *The Appeasers*, by Martin Gilbert and Richard Gott, observes:

For the appeasers it was the height of "realism" to criticize the Versailles Treaty, and to show that all Germany's grievances in the 1930's sprang from the injustices of this Treaty. It was "practical politics" to advocate Treaty revision in Germany's favor.

Some went beyond this and exhibited a still more unattractive side of realism when it is associated with weakness—the positive appeal which power has for it. When the historian A.L. Rowse suggested that the London *Times* would do better to pay less attention to Italy and more to the stronger Germany, the pro-appeasement editor of that paper, Geoffrey Dawson, replied: "To take your argument on its own evaluation—mind you, I'm not saying that I agree with it—but if the Germans are as powerful as you say, oughtn't we to go in with them?"

IT is difficult to resist the conclusion that thinking analogous to that illustrated by these examples is widespread in Europe today. The impulse to accommodate, and to adjust to, "the facts" is strong. So is the inclination to rule out one's own will and resolve as, potentially, one of the most significant of these "facts"—or to take the unbending of the springs of action in oneself as something one is as helpless to change as one is to move the stars from their courses.

All this is apparent in the plaintive appeals for an understanding of the allegedly unique difficulties which make effective action impossible or even prevent the keeping of promises made. The head of one German think tank once put it to me, with the air of one advancing an unanswerable argument, that it was completely unreasonable to expect the Federal Republic to give up a substantial proportion of the 5 percent of its trade that was conducted with the Soviet Union just to make a political point; another justified the failure to meet the promised 3-percent increase in defense spending on the grounds that for a country in the Federal Republic's circumstances, social security was more important than military security.

The same tendency is apparent, too, in the evident belief that attempting to improve one's position in significant ways—usually caricatured as a commitment to "winning" regardless of risk—is not only dangerous but simplistic and intellectually vulgar, clear evidence that one does not appreciate the "complexity" of things.

At the root of much of the European impatience and exasperation with the United States lies a resentment of the refusal by Americans to share this fatalistic attitude toward the facts of power

and to surrender control over their own destiny—to substitute, as someone has put it, the passive question, "What will become of us?" for the political question, "What is to be done?" Sometimes the words "impatience" and "exasperation" are utterly inadequate to describe the response. Feeling breaks all bounds and causes cultivated and normally fair men to say absurd and unforgivable things. Thus Michael Howard, the Oxford historian, writing in *Harper's* (February 1983), says that "in many American minds [he is speaking not of the kooks but of those he describes as friends] the flames of war seem already to have taken a very firm hold," and he goes on to speak of "the brutal paranoia of the Committee on the Present Danger." The persistent stress on complexity (as distinct from accepting it as obvious) is itself a clear indication of the European predicament. The world is always unmanageably complex to those who lack a coherent position and whose resolve is faltering.

IF FATALISM is one side of the coin, complacency is the other. It is the combination of fatalism and complacency which is particularly characteristic of contemporary Europe. The claim that Soviet power is irresistible, or at least too dangerous to resist, goes along with the confident assertion that Europeans "understand" the Soviet Union in a special way and that, given the chance (i.e., freedom from American pressure), they can "handle" relations with the Soviets successfully. Particularly in West Germany, stress on Soviet power is accompanied by stress on the "confused," "insecure," and "bumbling" nature of the Soviet leadership. It is only a short step—readily taken—from this to the assertion that it is in the Western interest to help the Soviets solve their problems and manage their crises. To fail to do so is said to be provocative and dangerous.

Along with this goes the belief, again particularly evident in the Federal Republic of Germany, that in any long-term interaction between themselves and the Soviet Union, they will be the gainers. In terms of Lenin's question "who, whom?" many Europeans are complacently confident that the outcome of such an interaction will be a process of osmosis which will gradually normalize the Soviet Union.

This complacent adherence to a best-case view of things sits strangely with the profound underlying fatalism, and the combination can certainly make for some confused polemics. But if the two are logically in conflict, psychologically they are compatible and complementary—a balancing and disguising of strategic pessimism by tactical optimism. A retreat to a fatalistic surrender of control over one's own destiny (particularly when such a surrender is not required by objective circumstance) is only likely to be bearable if one can convince oneself that the consequences of the sur-

render will not be too bad, that fate is appeasable. It becomes functionally necessary to believe that the Soviet Union is not too formidable and ruthless an enemy, that American demands and assertiveness are crude and mistaken, and that European sophistication and experience can somehow do the trick and outwit the logic of power. The application of this sophistication is, after all, the only remaining available game, and one's self-respect, as well as one's credibility in the eyes of others, requires that one have *some* game.

THE preferred term for the policy that results from this combination of attitudes is "damage-limitation." It is a reassuring term, having a vaguely technical ring about it and free from both the disastrous historical associations of "appeasement" and the frivolity of "losing gracefully," though it amounts to much the same thing. Damage-limitation is now the operative principle in a great deal of European diplomacy, with respect both to the Soviet Union and to the Third World.

There are, of course, circumstances in which preventing one's position from deteriorating too quickly or drastically is about all that one can reasonably expect to do. But when the adoption of such an approach becomes generalized, when the instinctive reflex across the board is to think in these terms, the result must be enfeebling. It means that the initiative will always be yielded to others, that they will set the agenda. It means that one's own policies will always be reactive and that one's own interests and values will never be asserted at their strongest, but in the form of modification on the claims of others. I have sat through weeks of discussion among Western diplomats in which there was no Western paper before the participants and the whole time was spent trying to decide how to respond to documents fundamentally hostile to Western positions.

This is an approach which contains a built-in danger of "buying the same horse twice": first in formulating one's initial negotiating position in a way which—with "sophistication" and "realism"—takes account of the interests of the other side, and secondly in actually negotiating on the basis of that already compromised position. A strategy of damage-limitation is one which regularly leads its practitioners to proclaim a 20-percent modification of a thoroughly objectionable proposal as a resounding victory—not only publicly but in cables to their own governments.

In multilateral forums, where the one-country-one-vote system and bloc-voting prevail, this damage-limitation approach is rationalized on the grounds that, as the vote is certain to go against the West in any case, the only sensible thing to do is to try to improve resolutions—however basically hostile to Western values and interests they may be—before they are voted on. But this practicality

ignores the importance of the symbolic and ideological dimensions of the activities of such forums, which are perhaps their only important ones—or, if it does not ignore them, it belittles them with such phrases as "mere rhetoric" or "hot air," a strange response from people who have had recent and bitter experiences of the role of symbols and ideology in politics. It also ignores the demoralizing long-term consequences for the West itself of tolerating and even conniving in systematic attacks on its own values, institutions, and interests.

Any suggestion of a stronger course—the curtailment of funds on a selective basis, for example, or even withdrawal from a particular organization (say, from UNESCO, the most anti-Western and inefficient of the UN special agencies)—is likely to be dismissed as extreme and crude, with the familiar argument that the West must stay in there to try to "manage" things and prevent them from getting even worse. But this is a weak argument in two respects. It ignores the fact that the West has proved itself singularly incapable of such management. More fundamentally, it fails to see that the presence of the West (even more than its money) is a necessary condition for the continuation of the games played in multilateral forums. Without the Western presence, these games would lose point and flavor.

The root error now, as in the 1930's, is a failure to recognize imperialism where it exists. Hans J. Morgenthau once defined appeasement as a policy of compromise, perfectly sensible when dealing with an adversary fundamentally committed to the status quo, but misapplied in a situation in which one is confronted with an imperialist power. That is, appeasement and imperialism are logically connected: it is the latter that transforms compromise into appeasement.

It may well be that a certain kind of practical realism, concentrating as it does on power and interests narrowly defined and being dismissive of more intangible factors, is naturally prone to this kind of error. In particular, this brand of realism tends to minimize the importance of ideology, the driving force of modern imperialism, seeing it as little more than "window dressing" or "rhetoric"; and it has a durable conviction that there are always deals to be struck if one can only show enough patience and ingenuity to find the right formula.

SUCH attitudes as these are, I believe, widely prevalent in Western Europe, and prevalent in influential circles. Clearly, even among those who hold them there are differences in the strength, consistency, and explicitness with which they are held and expressed. And some do not hold them at all. Margaret Thatcher, to take an obvious example, is not known as a good

loser. But even she is influenced by people whose instincts and convictions push in that direction, and sometimes their influence prevails: witness the decision taken to support Robert Mugabe's accession to power in Zimbabwe in 1979, which, whatever one might think of its merits, certainly represented a retreat, accepted reluctantly under extreme pressure from her advisers and colleagues, on Mrs. Thatcher's part; witness, too, her reaction to American policy over the gas pipeline, when a major question of East-West policy was reduced to a matter of contracts; and witness most of all her extremely hostile reaction to the American military intervention in Grenada.

The decision of the West Europeans to proceed with the deployment of Pershing-2 and cruise missiles may appear to contradict the above argument, but I do not think that it does. Acceptance of deployment is not for the most part based on the conviction that the case for doing so is sound and

strong, but has been reluctantly arrived at on the grounds that, having gone so far, West Europeans are stuck with it, and that American resentment would be too difficult to handle if they were to retreat. To the extent that this is the case, it is another manifestation of fatalism, of acquiescence in a decision imposed on Europe by the will of others rather than freely arrived at.

A last and obvious point. If the European view I have described is not universally held in Europe, it is equally true that it is not restricted to Europe. In the sense described, there are many "Europeans" in the United States, in and out of government—people who take as axiomatic the fact of America's naiveté, the superior sophistication of its allies, the wisdom of surrendering to complexity, and the efficacy of damage-limitation. The difference is that in the United States they are surrounded by a people which is still not quite reconciled to losing gracefully.